

**China's AIDS underclass (Aimin):
preserving power and inequality through media portrayals
of HIV/AIDS**

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Certificate of Authorship and Originality

This is to certify that this thesis is the result of my own work and ideas, and it has not been submitted for a previous degree. Any assistance I have received in its preparation, and all information and sources used are properly acknowledged in the text.

Johanna Hood

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The thesis grew out of a minor project I worked on as a research assistant in the Canadian Embassy in Beijing in 2002. I was stationed there for six months following the completion of my undergraduate degree in Pacific and Asian Studies at the University of Victoria. While there, I began collecting many of the early materials that are referenced in the thesis. My interest in HIV media continued while I worked towards a Master of Philosophy degree at the Australian National University which examined representations of Africans in China's HIV media.

I began my doctoral studies in 2005, at McGill University's Social Studies of Medicine and Anthropology departments, where I benefitted from spending three semesters participating in graduate coursework. I then spent a semester and a half in Renmin University's Anthropology Department where I had many enlightening discussions regarding China's media with colleagues and graduate students there. My final three and a half years as a doctoral student have been at the China Research Centre of the University of Technology, Sydney. There I have had the privilege of working with a talented and supportive supervisor, Professor Louise Edwards.

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Abstract

The ways in which HIV has been narrated in urban Chinese media has produced knowledge of a new kind of person known for their heightened susceptibility to HIV infection and transmission. I call these people the Aimin (艾民), a term made up of the first of the Chinese characters for “AIDS” (*ai* 艾 from *aizibing* 艾滋病) and the character for “people” (*min* 民).¹ The Aimin form part of a long tradition of othering and underclasses in China, but are unusual in that understandings of them are created through urban ascriptions of their identities and histories within China’s media. The production of the Aimin is a contemporary example of how different sectors of Chinese society collude to preserve existing power structures through the creation of social “underclasses.”

Aimin histories, however, are rarely mentioned in light of the political economy and discourses of value which pushed them to participate in an activity—blood-selling—which is highly taboo. Instead, they are often portrayed as residing in non-urban, out-of-the-way places that are difficult to travel to. The environments they inhabit are shown to be in decay and impacted severely by widespread incidence of blood-selling, poverty, marginality, and death from AIDS. The Aimin have distinct negative physical, intellectual, and moral qualities, which over time became portrayed as threats to the security, health, and prosperity of the Chinese nation.

As a consequence of these dominant portrayals, China’s HIV positive are widely feared and suffer high levels of discrimination and stigma. Furthermore, media consumers know little about the causes of the HIV epidemic in China’s central plains, nor about what is happening with regards to the actual spread of HIV within China. As a consequence of depoliticizing the Aimin’s histories—which

¹ I have chosen to capitalize Aimin due to the capitalization of the acronym it stands for, AIDS. I do not suggest by this that the Aimin have similar status to officially defined ethnic groups (*zu*) like the Han, the Dai, or the Hui. I do not italicize the term, as I do for other pinyin across the thesis, as it is my own.

would have provided an alternative, far more critical perspective on China’s supposedly successful modernization policies—top-level CCP leaders and scientists who were aware of the problem of AIDS in China’s central plains but failed to react remain unaccountable. The absence of discussion of the policies and ideologies which encouraged China’s left-behind agriculturalist peasants to sell blood preserves existing power hierarchies, cultures, and ideologies of inequality in contemporary China.